

**TESTIMONY OF MR. ERIC DAVIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE
BOOTH SOCIETY, INC., SPEARFISH, SOUTH DAKOTA
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS, OVERSIGHT
HEARING ON H.R. 5381, THE NATIONAL FISH HATCHERY SYSTEM
VOLUNTEER ACT OF 2006.**

June 15, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am Eric Davis, Executive Director of the Booth Society, a Friends Group at D.C. Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery, Division of Fish Hatcheries, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) in Spearfish, South Dakota. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding H.R. 5381, the National Fish Hatchery System Volunteer Act of 2006.

H.R. 5381 National Fish Hatchery Volunteer Act of 2006

The National Fish Hatchery System Volunteer Act (Hatchery Volunteer Act) would serve to create and enhance community partnerships, increase volunteer efforts, and allow partners to contribute financially to support the activities and mission of National Fish Hatcheries and other Fisheries Program offices. This bill would increase public awareness of the Fisheries Program's role in restoring and conserving America's fisheries and improve the ability of partner organizations to promote the stewardship of those resources.

Formed in 1984, the Booth Society is the oldest and largest non-profit, citizen-based Fisheries Friends Group in the country and coordinates the largest volunteer and outreach program for Fisheries. Our volunteers donate over ten percent of all volunteer hours in

the Program. Our mission is to promote, preserve, and enhance the educational, cultural, and recreational opportunities at D.C. Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery—in cooperation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service—for the benefit and enjoyment of the public. Our volunteers work to accomplish activities that the Service can not provide or is unable to fund.

We increase public awareness of the Service's programs by promoting and marketing the hatchery which has become one of the most popular visitor attractions in the northern Black Hills of South Dakota with over 150,000 annual visits.

Volunteers at D.C. Booth donate over 14,000 hours each year to preserve and enhance our historic facility that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Booth Society volunteers support the Service in their operations and create and enhance educational, cultural, and recreational opportunities by seeking grants, developing educational curriculums, interpreting the history of the site for visitors, giving school tours, funding exhibits, and hosting events.

While the volunteer program at D.C. Booth is strong, our vision is large, and our staff is small. As Executive Director of this Friends Group, I have only a portion of my time to devote to our volunteers. Many of our community members are interested in volunteering their time and energy, but we lack the time and resources to expand our program and accommodate the interest from prospective volunteers and supporters. We are one of very few hatcheries that is able to accept volunteer help, and we have worked

with other Fisheries Program supporters around our region who are also eager to volunteer but have no one to lead them or support their efforts. The Booth Society receives frequent requests from other stations on how to form Friends Groups and set up successful volunteer programs, but our resources limit our ability to extend a helping hand.

The Hatchery Volunteer Act will allow a few pilot volunteer coordination positions around the country that will enhance the development of volunteer services in the National Fish Hatchery System—a place where the public is eager to satisfy its desire to give something back to a Fisheries Program that has benefited its country and its citizens for so many years.

The Hatchery Volunteer Act is modeled after the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Act of 1998, which gave the Refuge System various authorities to develop agreements with partners, support operations, and promote the Refuge System. The Refuge Volunteer Act helped to considerably broaden, increase, and enhance the refuge volunteer program. Yet fledgling Fisheries Friends Groups have been unable to receive adequate coordination assistance, start-up funds, or training. I believe H.R. 5381 would provide the fuel needed to significantly increase volunteer services and provide increased support to the conservation of our Nation's fisheries resources just as it has so successfully within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

As recently as five years ago, there were just a few Fisheries Friends Groups across the country. The Service now has 18 such groups out of 150 eligible facilities. The public is showing us that they are eager to become involved and partner with the Service. In a time of waning federal resources to support conservation programs, we believe the government needs the help of its citizens who share the Service's vision of working with partners to restore and maintain our natural resources and the people who value and depend on them. With this bill, we have the opportunity to show the public that we value and appreciate their support. The Hatchery Volunteer Act will provide the mechanism for the Service to achieve its goals and save taxpayer dollars.

With the passage of the Hatchery Volunteer Act I believe we will see a very significant increase in Fisheries Friends Groups and of volunteer services on these Fish and Wildlife Service facilities.

The Booth Society, our partners, and the visitors we serve understand deeply the value of friends and of volunteers. Working together in partnerships we have accomplished much more than any of us could have done individually. D.C. Booth has been faced with many challenges over the years but is alive and well today because we have a model partnership that works and volunteers and a citizenry who care about D.C. Booth and the Fish and Wildlife Service's role in their community. Because we at D.C. Booth have seen such success with our partnerships and volunteer programs, we are anxious to share our model with other hatcheries and fisheries offices around the country and to realize the full potential of our own volunteer program and that of the other hatcheries around this

country for the betterment of each individual facility and of the Fisheries and Habitat Conservation program as a whole.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared testimony. On behalf of the Booth Society Board of Directors, I would like extend our appreciation to you and the rest of the Subcommittee for your leadership and interest in the Service's Fisheries Program, the National Fish Hatchery System, and all of us local citizens who want to volunteer our time—and encourage others to do the same—to the conservation of America's fisheries resources. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.